

Clozapine Yields Little Impact on Suicide in Veterans with Schizophrenia

VISN 1 MIRECC researchers found no difference in suicide rates in veterans diagnosed with schizophrenia and treated with clozapine or with typical antipsychotic medications. Clozapine, the first in a new generation of “atypical” antipsychotic medications, has been seen as a breakthrough drug because it is superior for treating those with schizophrenia who have failed to respond to standard medications. However, the effectiveness of clozapine must be balanced against substantially higher costs because weekly blood tests are required to detect a potentially fatal anemia that is a side effect in 1% of those treated. These costs could be offset substantially if it is shown to reduce the very high 10% suicide rate in patients with schizophrenia. Three prior studies showed that clozapine reduced suicide attempts and completed suicides but none included a matched comparison group. The MIRECC study was the first to use a carefully matched comparison group to evaluate the effect of clozapine on suicide over a lengthy three-year follow-up period. In contrast with previous findings, clozapine prescription was not associated with significant protection against suicide. While clozapine continues to play an important role for treating veterans with schizophrenia who do not respond to other medications, suicide prevention does not appear to be a factor in the decision to use this drug. The research team was comprised of Michael Sernyak, M.D., Rani Desai, Ph.D., Marilyn Stolar and Robert Rosenheck, M.D.